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PRETENDERS TO WISDOM.

BY SAMUEL L. KNAPP.

The magicians and astrologers, and all the train of the east, were not the only people who pretended to exalted wisdom, and to the possession of wonderful knowledge. The Gauls and the Britons, and, in fact, all the Celtic nations, had their magicians also. The druids were more remarkable than the wise men of the east. We have some very accurate notices of them, particularly from Julius Cæsar, on his return from Britain. The druids took their name from the methods, or rather from the place of their worship, under the large oaks, in the open air ; their temples were roofed only by the heavens ; and the worshippers were surrounded, or circumscribed, by a rude, rough, low wall. Their worship was dark, figurative, and enigmatical. It was a jumble of astronomy, astrology, medicine, and mathematics ; in a word, all they knew, and all they pretended to know, or believe, was wrapped up in their sacred rites.

The druids were divided into several *orders*, namely ; the Vacerri, who were the priests, and dealt in all the sacrifices, incantations, and matters of religion. Their rites are described as being awful indeed. They not only sacrificed animals, as many other nations did, but they went further ; and, in cases of great public calamity, made offerings of human beings, selected for the purpose. To appease an offended deity, according to their creed, human blood must flow ; but in this they were not alone. Many nations, bordering on Palestine, were guilty of these "*damned rites*." The mistletoe, a parasitical plant, that, in their climate, is an evergreen, was held most sacred by them. It generally springs from the crevices of the bark of the oak, some way up the tree, among the branches, where the bark is more loose than on the lower part of the body of the tree. This plant is not found in the oaks of our immediate region ; but it is seen, by those who visit Mount Vernon, hanging on the trees that overshadow the sacred relics of Washington, an emblem of a fame that can never die. The mistletoe is there sometimes plucked by purer hands than those of the blood-stained druids—by those of patriots—as a remembrancer of the place, and of the unfading laurels of the father of his country.

The second order was composed of the Bards ; they were the historical and genealogical poets of Gaul and Britain. These were the Magi and Sophi of these countries ; all the learning of their nation was found among them. They were astronomers and astrologers ; and the orators, who spoke to the people on every great event. To them also was confided the *healing art*. Their name is retained in our language to the present day, and will probably forever remain in it. From these bards, came all those Welch genealogies, which are so minute and extended, and of which the Welch are so proud, down to the present day.

The Lubages formed a third order. These were soothsayers, who probably did what the others told them to do. And the Simnothei were those who were tutors to the young initiates.

The women had a share in these druidical rites. The first class of them resembled the vestal virgins at Rome, and seemed to have the same vow of virginity, and the same influence among the people. Their number was small. The second class of the women were married, but were devotees, who were often from home whole seasons together.

The third class were female servants ; and from these came the weird-sisters, and the whole tribe of our vulgar witches ; and the word witch was indiscriminately used, both for themselves and husbands. These were spared, when the Romans made such havoc among the other classes, as being too contemptible for a conqueror's sword. They were not sought for, when Edward cut off the few remaining bards that the Romans and the Saxons and the Danes had spared.

Many traditions of the Druids have come down to us ; and there are societies of those who call themselves druids, at this day. The association is for poetical, social, and kind purposes, and quite harmless. The initiation brings together many of the rites once practised among the bards. And one of the arts they inculcate and require is improvisatori poetry. If the ceremonies of the druids who now exist, are of modern invention, he must have been a learned man who invented them.

The order of the House of Wisdom, was another body that laid claim to great mysteries. This body of wise men was established at Grand Cairo, in the reign of the sixth Caliph of the Fatemite race. History informs us that it was once the largest school in the world ; having had at one time fourteen thousand scholars. They lived in the midst of emulation, and in a blaze of genius. The Caliph lavished on them half his revenue. The robes they assumed have come down to us. The black gown and the professor's cap are among them. This body came nearer to our forms and divisions of the faculties, than that of any former body ; or, to speak more correctly, we have taken more from them than

from others. In this school, mixed with other learning, there were taught the occult sciences—astrology, palmistry, and divinations, by mystic characters, and the combination of figures of their own invention. The most chastened and sober Egyptian or Arabian imagination, under literary and scientific excitement, was but little short of the paroxysm of the Pythia, and the boldest of them pushed themselves into the world-unknown, with a species of harmless, but fearless insanity. Their poetry, with true Eastern splendor, had a most metaphysical cast. They spoke of things that were not, except in their imagination, as things existing. They brought their paradise to earth, and carried this world to paradise. The gods and demi-gods of their masters, the Greeks, were all reasoning beings ; but these followers of the prophet made their children of earth, or heaven ; continually acting under the full force of inspiration, according to their power of bearing it. In process of time, this house of wisdom became dilapidated ; and a branch of this society severed from the original stock, fled to the mountains, and set up for themselves. They pretended to have among them the elixir of life ; and their founder, Hassan Ben Sabah, was supposed to have drank it, and to have lived for ages. He was called the *old man of the mountains*. His order was called *Assassins*. The term, in that day, carried with it a different meaning from what it now does. It has been corrupted, as the words *knaves*, *tyrant*, *villain*, *bucanier*, and many others, have been. Deeds, have given new signification to these words ; so did the deeds of the *assassins*. Some remains of this order are supposed now to be in existence. Many intelligent travellers, at least, think so. All that remains of the house of wisdom at Grand Cairo, is a huge mosque, with many surrounding buildings, in which there is now kept a small and wretched school.

The descendants of the assassins are in every society, but are hunted down by the hue and cry of the virtuous in all communities ; and when taken, are branded or destroyed for their deeds of blood ; while the sons of the *house of wisdom*, like the pure streams of waters from our mountains, are too numerous to be distinguished or properly valued. There are other assassins than those who deal in blood—assassins of reputation—the most dangerous, because the most difficult to reach, or to destroy. These prowl through the land ; are found in the high-ways, and by-ways of life ; and, with a dagger-tongue, leave an incurable wound with every stab. The moral world is more overrun with monsters than the natural. The gibbet is for those who destroy life ; but what scaffold of infamy is there for those who destroy reputation ? To accept the cold and unmeaning apology of a slanderer, for the injury he has done, is like taking the saliva of a mad dog, venom, and froth and all, to cure the wound he has inflicted with his teeth.

There was, or, perhaps, there is, another society which we ought to mention, in connexion with those already named. I mean the Rosicrucian, or Brothers of the Rosy Cross. It was supposed to have existed in Germany, in the beginning of the fifteenth century. At the head of it, soon after it was founded, was Rosencrux, a learned man, who died, in a good old age, in the year 1484. The Rosicrucians were not much known in his time; for one of their principles was to keep themselves *invisible*. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, some of the learned Germans revived the society. They were alchymists, and astrologers, and pretended to know all the secrets of nature and grace. They held that dew was a great chemical power in nature, and they therefore took the title F. R. C. *Fratriis roris cocti*, or *brothers of exalted dew*; like many other titles, excessively unmeaning. They called themselves *illumines*, or *illuminati*, because all knowledge was, from their account, with them. I have no doubt that they did exist as a body. They assumed much, and their enemies gave them credit for still greater pretensions. Their first object was, probably, to enlighten mankind in their own way. The ignorance of the catholics, united with the intolerant spirit exhibited by the dignitaries of the church, at that time, made all the liberal minded associate, for the purpose of breaking down bigotry and tyranny.

It is thought that Calvin was among the brothers, and that he bore their coat of arms; but, if he was, he knew how to attack the errors of the church, without destroying the faith of man. He threw illumination into the cells of the Vatican, where reason had faintly shone before, and lit up the lamp of God in the dark shrine of the cloister, without crumbling all the building to the dust. The illuminati have been defended from any but good and pure motives, by several able pens; nor do I mean to condemn those of the old school. The new were a spurious breed—I mean those who figured at the commencement of the French Revolution. They assumed a name they had no claim to, and promulgated their spurious doctrines for those of their betters. The illuminati are now harmless, at least as far as we know them, in this country; and have no object in view, but that of enlightening mankind by the means of education.

The Carbonari is a society of modern growth, but one that has made some noise in the world. Its precise origin is not known. It is said by some writers, to have been founded by the late King of Naples, to embody the first talents in his cause: but when he found that the sentiments of the majority were too liberal for him, he suppressed it. But, from my knowledge of its constituent principles, I fully believe that it had an earlier growth than the one ascribed to it; although it might have been used by the king of Naples for particular purposes. It is full of taste and refinement. There

is nothing ignorant and vulgar about its constitution; nor, in this country, has it ever been used for improper purposes. It is too full of the best days of the republics, to have ever been used by a king of Naples, if he had known all things in and about it. It has a humble name, a *coal-man*; but those in the slightest degree acquainted with the names given to societies, are not to be told, that oftentimes their very names are matter of disguise, or have two meanings. It is thought that by this term carbonari, is only meant a living coal of patriotism, that shall forever be kept burning on the altar of liberty. The interior arrangement of this society is full of genius and taste, and well fitted for the polished Italians; but in an age of revolutions all secret associations are suspected, and generally traduced. This order was brought into this country from seven to ten years ago, and planted in this city and in Boston; but, in all probability, does not flourish much, as no great need of it can be proved to exist here. It was introduced by gentlemen, and those they brought within their pale, were men of intelligence and character. It requires too much learning and labour to keep it up with spirit, but it was founded with too much talent to expire in a short time.